

# THE REDFORD EFFECT: STAGECRAFT, STATECRAFT AND RHETORICAL PRAGMATISM

Tom Flanagan



Alison Redford won the race for the leadership of Alberta's Progressive Conservative (PC) party by campaigning better than her rivals. An essential part of her campaign was rhetorical pragmatism, which she claimed positioned her above ideology and interested in smart ideas, not left or right ideas. But governing will not be so simple, because real choices have to be made. The Alberta PCs now face a two-front war against the Liberals and the NDP on the left and the Wildrose Alliance on the right. If Redford governs according to her Red Tory background and inclinations, she will open up more space for Wildrose, which has already taken away many former PC core supporters.

Alison Redford s'est hissée à la tête du Parti progressiste-conservateur de l'Alberta en faisant tout simplement une meilleure campagne que ses adversaires. Elle s'est notamment démarquée par un discours pragmatique, se situant au-dessus des idéologies et se disant intéressée par les idées intelligentes, et non les idées de gauche ou de droite. Mais il ne lui sera pas facile de gouverner, un exercice qui nécessite des choix clairs, d'autant que son parti est confronté à sa droite par la Wildrose Alliance, et à sa gauche par les libéraux et les néodémocrates. Or si Mme Redford s'accroche à son passé de *red tory* et à son penchant pour le conservatisme social, elle contribuera à faire grossir les rangs d'une Wildrose Alliance qui a déjà ravi à son parti bon nombre de ses partisans de base.

**I**n the wee hours of the morning on October 2, 2011, Alison Redford won a surprise victory in the leadership race to succeed Ed Stelmach as leader of the Progressive Conservative Party and premier of Alberta. At the outset, no one gave Redford, a first-term MLA who had been minister of justice in Stelmach's government, much chance of winning, or even getting to the second ballot in the run-off procedure used by the Tories. She had only one supporter from the PC caucus, versus much larger numbers supporting Gary Mar, Doug Horner and Ted Morton, who were thought to be the front-runners. But Redford ran a much better campaign than any of her competitors, for which credit must go to her campaign manager, Stephen Carter, who had recently guided Naheed Nenshi to an unexpected victory as mayor of Calgary.

To begin with, Redford underwent a substantial personal makeover. She changed her hair and her wardrobe to look more feminine, and a winning smile replaced the famous Redford stare. Her campaign photo made her look like a warm, attractive mother, not a feminist human-rights lawyer. As the leadership campaign pro-

gressed, she distinguished herself from the crowded field of six by being the most willing to criticize policies adopted by Stelmach's government. She convinced the media that she stood for "change," even though she had been Stelmach's minister of justice and had publicly supported all the policies she now criticized. This was stagecraft of a high order.

Shortly before the first ballot scheduled for September 17, her campaign anonymously released a poll of party members for publication. Her team had turned her membership sales in early to ensure that her supporters would be well represented on the list. The poll results showed her far behind front-runner Gary Mar, but still solidly in second place, several points ahead of Doug Horner and Ted Morton. (Full disclosure: I like this manoeuvre because I did something similar when I managed Stephen Harper's 2004 campaign against Belinda Stronach for leadership of the federal Conservatives.) Publication of the poll was critical to ensuring that Redford got to the second stage, because it showed her supporters that she was a serious candidate and worth turning out to vote for. Given her weak profile at the

beginning, potential supporters might not have bothered to vote unless they received a clear indication that she was electable.

Throughout the campaign, Redford cultivated public-sector unions, whose members can be mobilized to buy a PC membership card and

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vote in a leadership race. Her service as justice minister had already given her good relations with the police. She took the opportunity to loudly defend public health care after Gary Mar went off script and mused about introducing more private elements into the system; it became a golden opportunity to reach out to nurses and other health care workers. Then in the final two weeks of the campaign she met with the leadership of the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA), promising to increase school funding by \$107 million within 10 days of becoming premier. The ATA didn't officially endorse her, but it did encourage members to join the party and vote in the race (nudge, nudge; wink, wink). Poll observers agree that many teachers and students turned out to vote, perhaps enough to give Redford her margin of victory.

**T**his strategy was perfectly designed to exploit the unusual rules of the race. The Alberta PCs allow people to buy memberships for \$5 right up to the close of voting on the day of the second ballot, whereas most Canadian parties that choose their leader by membership ballot impose a cut-off date for joining,

An Alberta PC leadership race is almost like an American open primary, in which independents and adherents of other parties can participate to influence the nomination of candidates. Appealing outside the normal limits of the party is an old strategy in these Alberta leadership races; in 2006, Jim

Dinning sold memberships to Liberals, Ted Morton to Wildrose supporters, and Ed Stelmach to members of the Ukrainian community. Redford's team extended the basic strategy by targeting public-sector unions and putting specific policies in the window as an incentive to join the party.

Another adaptation to the rules occurred after the first ballot, when the second-place Redford announced that she was encouraging her supporters to give their second-choice support to the third-place Doug

Horner. Again, the Alberta PC rules are unique; the top three finishers, rather than the top two, go on from the first round to the second; the second round is conducted by alternative ballot, on which voters can indicate a second preference. One has to get a majority on the second ballot to win; if no one gets a majority of first preferences, the third-place finisher is eliminated and his

votes are redistributed according to the indicated second preferences. Redford's gesture cost her nothing to make, because her second preferences would not be used unless she finished third on the second ballot, in which case she would already be out of the running, but offering her second preferences to Horner was a symbol of warmth toward that camp, which was evidently reciprocated on election day. Gary Mar was still ahead by 4,000 votes when the first preferences were counted, so Redford won only on the strength of second preferences transferred to her after Horner finished third and was eliminated.

Redford's performance in the last leadership debate also helped her cause. Her mother, who had long been very sick, died shortly before the debate, but Redford drew applause for carrying on with strength and grace. She also showed her claws by attacking Mar over his acceptance of his MLA's severance pay. When Stelmach appointed Mar as Alberta's representative in Washington, D.C., Mar said he would postpone taking the severance pay

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that Alberta MLAs are entitled to in lieu of a pension. But after a year Mar took the money — almost \$500,000 — after having given the impression he would wait until he was through with the Washington appointment. Redford called him on it during the debate, thus giving the impression that she was the one who stood for change away from the old boys' club and self-serving practices of the past.



CP Photo

Alison Redford takes a victory turn as the surprise winner of the Alberta PC leadership race. Now she's premier of Alberta, and Tom Flanagan writes: "deservedly so. She ran a better campaign than any of her competitors."

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The political situation is a new one for the Alberta PCs. For most of the 40 years they have been in power, their only serious opposition was on the left, and that was divided

between the Liberals and New Democrats. But the mistakes of the Stelmach government led to the rise of a new party on the right — the Wildrose Alliance — now supported by many former PCs. Formerly a party of the centre-right, the Alberta PCs have now become more like the Liberals of Ontario — a party of the centre with significant opposition on both left and right. It is possible for a centrist party to win, as Dalton McGuinty has just demonstrated in Ontario, but there is always danger

in fighting a two-front war, as shown by the federal Liberals, who have become a shadow of their former selves because they've bled so much in both directions.

Wildrose is a particularly dangerous opponent for the PCs because its conservatism appeals to traditional PC core voters. A game-theoretic analysis using the spatial models pioneered by Anthony Downs suggests that Redford should move to the right to confront the Wildrose threat head on. If Kim Campbell had done that in

1993, the federal PCs might have put down the Reform insurgency. But Redford will not want to move right because she is by pedigree and inclination among the reddest of Red Tories. She would be more comfortable on the left side of the PC coalition, talking about activist government and well-funded social services rather than smaller government and balanced budgets. But if she

Tory circles. I remember Joe Clark telling me 20 years ago that Reform would never succeed because voters cared only about competence, not ideology. Rhetorical pragmatism seems to be working thus far for Mayor Nenshi in Calgary, but that is in local politics where political parties do not play and many issues can be made to appear non-ideological. (It is often said there is no conserva-

Meanwhile the budget is still in deficit, and Alberta voters, at least on the right side of the spectrum, are still concerned about it. During the leadership race, Redford promised to balance the budget by 2013, even as she also promised more money for education and implied there would be more money for health care. So what will happen in February 2012, when the Redford government has to bring in a

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new budget? She will have to zig or zag; rhetorical pragmatism will not suffice.

If Redford had re-appointed fiscal hawk Ted Morton as finance minister, it would have been a signal that she

goes there, she leaves behind previous Conservative voters whose ideal points now become closer to the Wildrose position than to the new PC position.

There is a sort of solution to Redford's dilemma that Stephen Carter applied to Naheed Nenshi's campaign, though it appeared earlier with Barack Obama. I call it rhetorical pragmatism. Position the candidate above or beyond ideology — neither liberal nor conservative; interested in smart ideas, not left ideas or right ideas. Obama rode rhetorical pragmatism all the way to the White House. Redford did the same during the leadership race, putting forth an eclectic mix of positions, favouring, for example, both more funding for social services and balanced budgets. Carter, now Redford's chief of staff, followed a similar line when the new premier unveiled her cabinet choices: "They [Wildrose] are going to try to portray this as if we've got a big-spending government, but the idea of left or right is irrelevant to this government. What's relevant is what is smart and effective. That's what we're heading toward."

tive or liberal way to pick up the trash — although an ideological debate can ensue over whether to contract the service out or have it performed by city employees.) And rhetorical pragmatism also worked well for Redford in the leadership race. But it is an open question whether it can succeed over the long run in the business of government, where actual decisions have to be made, and leaders have to progress from stagecraft to statecraft. Obama has discovered this in the United States, where he often looks confused and ineffective, having disappointed both his liberal core supporters and the Republicans and Independents who voted for him in 2008.

**I**n the Alberta context, one of Ed Stelmach's biggest failings was that his government started to incur large deficits with no plausible plan for returning to balanced budgets. Ultimately that cost him his job as premier, when Finance Minister Ted Morton threatened to resign because Stelmach would not approve a realistic plan to end deficit spending. Faced with that opposition, Stelmach also promised to resign, leading to the leadership race that made Redford premier.

was serious about balancing the budget. But instead she gave Morton the energy portfolio and appointed her old friend Ron Liepert as finance minister. Liepert is another Red Tory; in fact, he managed Redford's unsuccessful 2004 campaign to win the federal Conservative nomination in Calgary-West against Rob Anders. Liepert's appointment seems to fit with Redford's latest pronouncement that balancing the budget by 2013 is an "objective" but not a commitment. That won't be good enough for the former PC supporters who have already migrated to Wildrose and the current PC supporters who are thinking about it.

Battle lines are shaping up for the most interesting election since Liberal leader Laurence Decore took a serious run at the PCs in 1993. New PC leader Ralph Klein saved the day for the Tories in 1993 by veering to the right, where Decore had threatened to out-flank; now we will see whether Redford's rhetorical pragmatism can beat back the Wildrose challenge.

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**T**his strategy of rhetorical pragmatism has deep roots in Red